

# Harmony and Disharmony in the Anthracite Coal Fields, 1823-1869

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In the early years of the nineteenth century, notably in and near the rapidly growing towns and cities in the northeast, it became clear, as more and more trees were being cut down for fuel that, eventually, the forests near those towns and cities would all be cut down and that an energy crisis was looming ahead. If not lumber for fuel, then what? Coal? Yes, a well known and widely used fuel in Great Britain, but with the War of 1812 underway, however, and with the blockade of the eastern seaboard by the British during the war years, coal could not be imported from Wales.

Fortuitously, outcroppings of anthracite coal were discovered in northeastern Pennsylvania at the time, and blacksmiths and others learned how to use “stone coal”, as it was called at the time, for heating and numerous industrial purposes. Industrious and visionary entrepreneurs (William and Maurice Wurts) recognized that money could be made if stone coal could be mined and sold to energy-hungry towns and cities in the northeastern United States. Enter the Delaware and Hudson Canal Company—and the rest is history.

In the period from 1823, when the Delaware and Hudson Canal Company came into existence, up to 1857, when the first labor/management confrontation in the anthracite coal fields took place, the working relationship between labor and management was harmonious. The Company had a product to mine (untold millions of tons of anthracite coal) and market. The market for coal was wide open, and that market grew larger and larger with each passing year. Jobs were plentiful. Life was good.

“Yes,” said some, “life is good, but it could be better if we were paid more for our labor.” And with the verbalization of that thought [hypothetical, to be sure] a new door opened in the history of the D&H and in the history of America.

**Work Stoppage in 1857:** The first labor/management confrontation in the anthracite coal fields took place in 1857, when the miners in Carbondale stopped working and made a “demand” (if you please) to management for an increase in pay for each ton of coal mined, and then stopped mining. This work stoppage came to an end when a delegation of miners met with D&H Chief Engineer, Charles Pemberton Wurts (outside the Wurts house “at Union Hill”) on Lincoln Avenue in Carbondale, and made known to management their wishes. C. P. Wurts promised the miners that their wage “demands” would be met, provided they went back to work at once. The miners went back to work. The work stoppage was over, and harmony again prevailed in the anthracite coal fields.

**Work Stoppage in 1859:** In April 1859, difficulties (disharmony) arose again between the D&H management and the Company's miners. The miners formed a grievance committee that met with C. P. Wurts, who was again called upon to mediate a resolution to the difficulties (the miners were unwilling to work for private /non-corporate /small-time contractors but willing to work for the D&H; the D&H expressed disapproval of "the late acts of incendiarism of which some lawless and desperate persons have been guilty"). The "difficulties" were resolved, as a journalist writing for the *Carbondale Advance* noted, "without any sacrifice, so far as we can see, of dignity or rights on

either side." That same writer noted, appropriately, that "The overture for work was accepted in the same spirit and on the terms as proffered, and the assurances made of kindly feeling seem to be genuine on all sides. / The Miners [in the upper Lackawanna and Wyoming Valleys] deserve as a body the credit due to all good citizens for their scrupulous regard to law and good order and with "an abstinence from those disturbances which rumor has in some neighboring places [e. g., the southern portion of the anthracite coal fields] reported as existing..." (*Carbondale Advance*, April 30, 1859, p. 2)

Once the revisions to the D&H transportation system envisioned for the 1859 configuration of the Gravity Railroad were in place, and with labor and management again working harmoniously together, it is not surprising that coal shipments from Carbondale and Honesdale, via the Gravity Railroad, were larger than ever (between three and four thousand tons per day).

**Work Stoppage: February 15, 1864:** The coal business in the Lackawanna and Wyoming Valleys came to a halt again, in February 1864, because the men in the upper Lackawanna and Wyoming Valleys "turned out" (stopped working) in support of their colleagues south of Wilkes-Barre, the cause of the work stoppage by the miners "below" being a reduction in the price of mining and an increase in the cost of oil and black powder.

**Work Stoppage, or "Strike":** In the notice in the *Carbondale Advance* of February 20, 1864, about this work stoppage, that work stoppage is referred to by the *Carbondale Advance*, in quotations marks, as a "Strike". During this work stoppage, the "Company", the D&H Canal Company, we read in that notice, "are improving the time in necessary repairs." Here is that notice from the *Carbondale Advance* of February 20, 1864, p. 2:

"There has been nothing done in the Coal Business here the present week, what is termed a "Strike" commencing on Monday last. We are not informed of particulars, but we believe the men here turned out in behalf of those below, the price of mining there having been reduced, and [the price of] oil and powder raised. The Company are improving the time in necessary repairs."

The fact that the *Carbondale Advance*, in its February 20, 1864 issue, said that nothing was being done in the coal business because "what is termed a *Strike*" began on February 15, 1864 is very interesting from an etymological perspective. It tells us that the word "strike" must have been regarded as a new word at the time in the language of the anthracite coal fields of northeastern Pennsylvania, perhaps in America as well. The use of the English word "strike", we have learned from etymological reference texts, first appeared in 1768, when sailors, in support of labor demonstrations in London, "struck" or removed the topgallant sails of merchant ships at port, thus crippling the ships. That being the case, on seeing a merchant ship at port with no topgallant sails, one would know, immediately, that the sailors on board, having *struck*/taken down/removed the topgallant sails, had struck / were *on strike* (not working).

**March 1864: Strike of D&H Railroad Workers, Miners, and Laborers in Progress:** On March 5, 1864, we learn from an article that was published in the *Carbondale Advance* on that date, (1) that a large share of the D&H railroad workers had been "on a strike for several days past," and (2) that the strike among the miners and laborers was still in effect. Given those facts (railroad workers on strike, miners and laborers on strike), the D&H closed their entire works and shops.

Both the D&H miners and railroad workers in Carbondale were, however, back to work on Monday, March 14, 1864. The miners who worked in the mines at Archbald, Olyphant, and Dickson City, which were worked by "Operators" (private owners, not the D&H) were still on strike.

**1868: Workmen's Benevolent Association:** The Workmen's Benevolent Association (formerly known as Miners and Laborers' Benevolent Association) was founded in 1868 by John Siney, who was born in Ireland about 1831, and who came to America in 1862 and settled in St. Clair, near Pottsville, PA. The original intent of the WBA, which was organized for the purpose of giving sick benefits to miners and aiding the families of those who were killed in the mines, was to represent all ethnic groups working in the anthracite mines. This organization was quickly turned to the purposes of the miners for consultation in the emergency.

The WBA was most effective, it should be noted, in areas where there were many independent operators, and not in areas where there were large companies, such as the D&H. Ultimately, at the peak of its power, the WBA represented approximately 80 percent of the workers in the anthracite industry, and is generally regarded as the first effective union of anthracite miners. In Schuylkill County and in areas where there were many independent coal operators and small mining companies (but not in areas where there were larger companies such as the D&H), the WBA won some early victories for the workers.

During the Civil War and the years immediately following, there was much prosperity in the anthracite coal fields, and steady work for all, the only difficulty being to get enough workmen. Wages were good. It was not unusual in the war years and after for miners to earn \$200 a month; the wages of the miners' laborers were proportionately high. Everyone about the mines had plenty of greenbacks, which gradually approached gold and silver in value. Ultimately, of course, when market needs were met and work hours were reduced and/or reductions in wages were made, there was no doubt about the result from the start: a strike was declared (disharmony) against the mine owners/operators by the miners.

**Four-month Work Suspension of Mining: May 10, 1869—mid-September 1869:** John Siney spent the winter of 1869 organizing the miners in all six anthracite counties: Schuylkill, Luzerne (then including Lackawanna), Carbon, Northumberland, Columbia, and Dauphin. The delegates decided to find out whether the miners desired a general strike, both to raise the price of coal and to win higher wages. At the second meeting of the council, on April 20, 1869, the members voted in favor of a general suspension of mining on May 10, the first general strike ever called in the anthracite region [emphasis added].

The order was well obeyed except in the district around Scranton and Pittston, where the collieries were owned by the three so-called "Scranton companies"--the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western Railroad Company; the Delaware and Hudson Canal Company; and the Pennsylvania Coal Company--and the men had in consequence much stronger opposition than did those who worked for individual operators. After some persuasion the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western and the Delaware and Hudson miners joined the strike, but the Pennsylvania Coal Company employees refused to quit their jobs.

In early May 1869, a four-month long strike by the D&H miners, in support of an initiative by the coal operators and miners in Schuylkill County, began. From the notice about the beginning of this suspension that was published in the *Carbondale Advance* of May 15, 1869, we learn that "Many of our thinking men express the belief that the suspension has been got up by Schuylkill Co. men, for the benefit of operators and miners in that county, and that our region will suffer an injury, while they reap an advantage." Here is that notice:

**"The Suspension.** / Mining has this week been generally suspended throughout the Anthracite Coal Region. / Those that have inaugurated the movement, promise great benefits as the result both to operators and miners, both to proceed from an advance of coal in the market. We believe they are sincere in these hopes, but we fear they will not realize them fully. / Many of our thinking men express the belief that the suspension has been got up by Schuylkill Co. men, for the benefit of operators and miners in that county, and that our region will suffer an injury, while they reap an advantage. The result only can determine these things. We are resolved not to look on the dark side of the picture, but hope for the best." (*Carbondale Advance*, May 15, 1869, p. 3)

During this 4-month period, mining and all shipments of coal by the D&H were suspended. Passenger and general freight movement were not affected by the suspension. In June 1869, the suspension continued. A primary objective of the WBA at this time was to obtain "basis" (wages for the miners based on the sale price of the coal) from the operators. The small coal companies "in the Schuylkill and other regions below" agreed on the "basis" demands by the miners. The larger companies, such as the D&H, would not agree to "basis". In the June 19, 1869 issue of the *Carbondale Advance* we read:

**"Continuance of the Suspension.** / Suspension still continues at the Mines of the Del. & Hudson, and Del. L. & W. companies and now seems likely to be indefinitely prolonged. / The order of the General Council of the Workingmen's Association, to commence where they can obtain 'basis' and 'conditions', does not at all improve the prospect here. / Work will probably commence at an early day in the Schuylkill and other regions below, and they thus secure a harvest at our expense, as was probably originally intended by them. / The works of Filer & Co., at Green Ridge are in operation, and considerable quantities of coal from their mines has this week passed over the railroad." (*Carbondale Advance*, June 19, 1869, p. 3)

In July 1869 the suspension continued, at a loss of about \$20,000 a day to the Lackawanna Valley. By late-August 1869, with the D&H and the D. L. & W. now willing to pay "the liberal wages now paid by the Pennsylvania Coal Company," it seemed likely that the suspension would come to an end. In the *Carbondale Advance* of August 21, 1869, we read:

**"The Long Suspension.** / Not only have our business community been very anxious and restless of late under the prolongation of 'the suspension,' but during the past week there has been much discontent manifested by many of our most intelligent miners that had no agency in bringing about the present unfortunate state of things. / Our business men have long been fully satisfied that the question of 'basis' was *out of the question*—that the Companies in our valley had been fully determined not to entertain it, and under no state of things would adopt it. This being so it would be evident that it was idle to talk of it, or look for it, or wait for it as weeks, months or years would work no change. / It has been evident that if this question of 'basis' was out of the way there would

be little if any trouble in settling everything else satisfactorily to all concerned. The Delaware & Hudson, and D. L. & W. Companies have both signified their willingness to pay the liberal wages now paid by the Pennsylvania Coal Company. / Our latest advices from Scranton look favorable. There may yet be clouds, but there is certainly grounds for hope that we are seeing ‘the beginning of the end.’” (*Carbondale Advance*, August 21, 1869, p. 2)

The financial impact on the D&H of the 4-month long suspension, remarkably, was not negative. In *Century of Progress* (pp. 204-205) we read: “. . . there occurred, during the canal season of 1869, a long strike of the company’s miners. Although this strike entirely suspended mining for a period of about four months, ending in the middle of September, the net income from the business of the calendar year 1869 was about thirteen and one-half per cent on the share capital, a return about two percent higher than that of the preceding fiscal year. The records of the company give no particulars as to the circumstances under which the miners returned to work.”

The strike ended in early September 1869, and harmony once again reigned in the anthracite coal fields. The miners at the Avondale colliery and mines (across the Susquehanna River from Wilkes-Barre), among many others, agreed to go back to work.

(End of Part 1 of *Harmony and Disharmony in the Anthracite Coal Fields*. To be continued in the October 2023 issue of this publication.)

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